Firewise plantings can help protect property

It’s no secret that Oklahoma has been hot and dry this year. Triple digit heat and below normal rainfall have left the state dusty and parched.

Unfortunately, due to high heat and low moisture, wildfires have consumed many acres of land across all parts of the state. Although fire will always be a concern for landowners and homeowners, whether it’s one started by lightning or an unattended grill, there are steps that can be taken to help protect your property.

The key is to not provide fuel for the fire. While most people do want the landscaping around their home and property to look good, vegetation often can be highly flammable. Fortunately, there are plants and shrubs available that are more fire-resistant (not fire-proof) than others. Although these plants can be damaged or killed in a fire, their foliage and stems don’t significantly contribute to the fuel.

Oklahoma State University Extension is one of the agencies that was involved in providing what is known as Firewise information. Firewise became a catalyst for educational resources and programs to help homeowners make wise landscaping decisions.

When selecting plants to include in a Firewise landscape, homeowners need to identify plants with a low flammability rating for areas nearing the home. By selecting plants with certain characteristics, you can reduce the flammability potential of your landscape and provide habitat for wildlife. There are several factors that influence the fire characteristics of plants, including plant moisture content, age, total volume, dead material and chemical content.

Large amounts of dead branches, leaves or needles adds fuel to any fire. Plants with low flammability have open, loose branches with a low volume of branches. Many of Oklahoma’s deciduous trees and shrubs are fire resistant.

Consider the leaf structure of plants and trees before installing them in the landscape. Leaves that are moist and supple, such as the sedum leaf, are more resistant to fire, as long as the plant is healthy. Herbaceous perennials such as sedum, hellebore, and ice plant make great choices for the landscape because they remain green in the winter, which reduces their flammability.

If you’ve seen a cluster of cedar trees on fire, it’s an unforgettable sight. Cedars, along with pine, juniper and Yaupon holly contain oils and resins that are highly flammable. Should you choose to use them in a landscape, don’t plant them near your home or other structures on the property.

Plants that accumulate a lot of dry and dead material such as twigs, needles and leaves should be planted away from the house.
For those with landscaping plans in the future, use this fall and winter to do some research into what plants grow well in Oklahoma’s diverse climate, but also are considered more fire resistant than other options. It could mean the difference in being able to keep a wildfire under control before it does too much damage.